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Mid-Quarter Self Evaluation

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May 9, 2017

During Spring 2017, I have been working on my first ILC within an SOS program. My ILC is titled, “Independent Research into Radical Political Theory,” and has focused on reading, watching films and lectures, and analyzing radical theorists and movements that have occurred or been active mostly within the last five-hundred years. When I was first putting this contract together, I made too many assignments--weekly I started out by reading 200 to 400 pages a week, followed with films and lectures that varied from one to three hours. Every week I have written a synthesis paper attempting to focus on the topics I found to be most applicable within the context of this contract, and I have kept a media log cataloguing radical events or actions happening around the world.

Writing multiple papers, updating my WordPress site, maintaining an updated log of events, connecting the places I have seen in Italy with my curriculum through an Instagram page, watching films and lectures, balancing two books every week, and doing cyber seminars with another student back home has all been quite a lot for me to do every week. The first four weeks I was able to maintain the stride relatively well; week five and six I cut back on my readings and film watching. Instead of focusing so much on reading so much for week six and on, I am planning on finding ways to incorporate art and creativity into my projects. If I can read less and focus in on a topic in order to more thoroughly understand it, I think I will benefit more from what I am learning rather than feel pressured to write papers that I wish I had time to go more in depth on.

Throughout the quarter thus far, I have attempted to parallel modern movements with historical theories and movements. Through reading Kropotkin and his theory of mutual aid, learning about the Paris Commune of 1871, and reading about anarcho-communism described by Errico Malatesta, I was able to write a synthesis paper for week three that encapsulated ideas of potential for humans to utilize mutual aid to challenge modern oppression and establish a more communal way of living. I have come to the conclusion that as much as radicals in 2017 want to recreate certain forms of resistance, it is more effective to understand why events have happened while keeping in mind that radicals can build off of the human histories of resistance. Mutual aid is integral to challenging capitalism; it is the theory that we are most successful when we work together even if our ideologies are different. Radicals should take what they can from historical resistance while utilizing theories of mutual aid that promote the idea that everything we have now has been built on cooperation between humans. Even capitalism has been built on cooperation, and every resistance movement has as well--good things do not just inevitably come from mutual aid, they have to be built through actively challenging microcosms of oppression within radical communities.

While reading Rosa Luxemburg and watching lectures by Richard Wolff, a Marxist economist, I wrote a paper that discusses the potential for strikes in a global capitalist economy. These two theorists together helped me realize that it may be impossible for strikes to make a large enough impact on capitalist society unless they are engaged in globally. Our struggles are connected over thousands of miles, even when we engage in different ideologies or ways of organizing. A prime example of this is provided by Kropotkin: in Europe, the serfs all overthrew feudalism around the same time even though they did not organize as one body in revolting. They rose up and found a way to challenge feudalism over the course of one hundred years, without modern communication technologies to let other areas know what was going on.

Every week, I have been broadening my understandings regarding resistance and what it looks like; I am left with questions about the effectiveness of certain tactics in an age of militarized police, the prison industrial complex, and false morality. Black Bloc, a tactic that is utilized by many radicals at protests to hide their identities from police and white supremacists, seems to be turning into a tactic that results in almost immediate violence from police (whether windows get broken or not). Strikes have been proven to be successful in stopping the flow of capital and demanding better working conditions; within modern global capitalism, strikes do not make as much of an impact in many industries because they can always find more labor somewhere else.

My media log has illuminated the rise of the Alt-Right movement, the resurgence of fascism in political platforms from the United States to France, and the similarities between the early 1900’s and the early 2000’s. It used to be an accepted ideology to kill fascists, but now people are electing them once again into positions of power over the rest of us. While I would not say that I think history repeats itself, I am maneuvering through the idea that we need to analyze histories of oppression and resistance in modern contexts. History has proven that fascism cannot be destroyed with peace and love, or with a ballot box. While leftists hung onto Bernie Sanders, Trump’s money and connections won him the position as president.

Those who have protested Trump’s inauguration are facing years in prison, while the irony of the Alt-Right movement proclaims they fight for freedom of speech. The KKK can have rallies with lit torches, white supremacists can openly proclaim that white people are genetically superior to people of color, police in Olympia, Washington can put up “free speech zone” barricades to protect Trump supporters at rallies while arresting people who challenge the racist rhetoric of these types of demonstrations. On the other side, journalists are getting arrested for asking too many questions and legislators are passing laws that make it legal to hit protesters with cars. While white supremacists can get permits for their hate rallies and have violently attacked those who disagree with them while police watch, leftists either get permits rejected or do not apply for them because they fear having their name on a protest that could result in charges or prison time.

Our situation in modern global capitalism is new and everything that I have been reading has shown me that we are living in a time unlike any other. This is applicable to my everyday life: I am a student, I am a worker, and I am a radical. These three identities do not always coincide well together; even this quarter I have struggled with balancing my personal life, my ideologies, and my schoolwork. I have been invested in the readings and the papers I have written unlike any other time in my academic career. On the other hand, I have been terrified of the readings. The more I learn, the harder it is for me to invest in education. My writings and my schoolwork may reflect that fear. I worry that I should have chosen different topics to study, or that the papers I write could be used against me some day. Anarchists have been killed by the state, imprisoned for years or life, threatened and murdered by white supremacists, and it seems that while capitalism still exists it will always be this way. Putting my ideologies out so publicly could be dangerous for me; even with the threats anarchists face I don’t see the point in choosing a different path to study when anti-capitalist ways of organizing society are so obviously needed. So, while I feel I have been investing a lot of thought and time into my schoolwork, I also feel that my confusion with what I want to do with my own life is reflected in my work. I wish I had more time to go more in depth on the topics I am studying, and am thinking about doing another ILC that I can construct in a way that will give me space to focus on more particular topics rather than the more broad categories I chose for this ILC.

For the rest of spring quarter, I am going to start reading and writing less and investing more into creative ways to describe what I am learning from the curriculum. During week six, I posted a song and a poem that I wrote that were both inspired by theorists I had been reading. I felt like these were good opportunities to share how I am thinking and feeling about the world without forcing someone to read through an entire wordy and lengthy paper. One of my goals is to learn about mutual aid and effective organizing strategies for myself, but also a key component is finding ways to appeal to others and get them interested in these topics as well.